

Sermon: Matthew 20:17-28
March 2, 2008

You just hit it big! Your numbers in the lottery matched all the other numbers. This is the winning ticket. What is the prize you wonder. How much did I win? Where is the big check? The lottery people come to you and inform you that your prize is that you get to serve other people for the rest of your life! Isn't that great? How would you feel? You would immediately object. "What kind of a prize is this? Where is my money?" Who wants to serve another person? This goes against everything. I want to be free to live how I want to live. I don't want to be waiting hand and foot on someone else or worrying about what they need or how they feel. What about me? I think we would probably react all the same way. But how do we react when we hear Jesus say, "Whoever wants to be first must be your slave." This rings us back to a sobering reality that we don't need a winning ticket to make us a slave to others, Jesus already has. But it is a good thing. Let's let Jesus show us how and why as he teaches us that life means being in service.

Jesus wouldn't ask us to do it if he hadn't done it first. Jesus describes his life in service to us in this way: "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death¹⁹ and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" "We are going up to Jerusalem," Jesus says. Do you realize just how loaded of a sentence that is? Jesus knew very well what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem. He knew very well that it was going to happen to him on this trip. But he goes. He chooses to go, because he is going there to serve you.

Jesus shows just how much he understands about what is going to happen as we see how he describes the event to his disciples. He names the chief priests and teachers of the law who are going to condemn him to death. He mentions the flogging. He mentions that he is going to be handed over to the Romans who were Gentiles. He points out the method of his death. He mentions his betrayal, or does he? The word translated betrayal basically means, "to be handed over." Is this referring to the betrayal by his disciple? Judas is not mentioned with the other details. There is no more vague mention of one of the disciples betraying him. This might be better translated that the Son of Man is going to be handed over. Who handed Jesus over in the first place? His Father did, with full agreement from Jesus, the Son. All of this shows us that he is going to the cross willingly and he is doing it to serve us.

If you still can't quite fathom that Jesus would do all of this for you, look at how Jesus refers to himself. He calls himself the "Son of Man." This is a term that 99% of the time Jesus uses to refer to himself. We might expect that Jesus would call himself the Son of God, but he calls himself the Son of Man. Why? It emphasizes again that Jesus is doing all of this for us, sons and daughters of men. He, who is the Son of God, became man so that he could serve us, be our slave to rescue us from hell. He put himself in our place. He became our servant so that we could be set free.

Jesus summarizes this whole thought for us at the end of the text where he says, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many." He

deserved to be served. He deserved to be set up in a palace and worshipped. He deserved to have the best of everything. But he made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant, he served us in the ultimate way, by giving up his life for us. That is life in service of us, not only life lived for us, but life forfeited for us.

Now Matthew shows us that this lesson about Jesus serving us is an important one to learn as we see an example of the exact opposite type of thinking. Jesus became a servant of all, yet most people want to be the boss of all. Matthew tells us, "Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.²¹ "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." James and John were part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples and they couldn't wait to be Jesus' number one and number two disciples. Their mother got involved and brought the request before Jesus. Basically she said, "When you take over your kingdom, put my sons in the number one and number two positions behind you." What a bold request! But what the request showed was that they did not understand Jesus' Kingdom or how it worked.

Yet Jesus does not blast his disciples, but deals with them very gently. He asks them, "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" By the cup, Jesus is referring to everything he was going to suffer in Jerusalem, the handing over, the scourging, the humiliation, the suffering and the dying. James and John were not going to experience this. They were not going to pay for the sins of the world by their life.

However they again show that they don't understand as they answer, "We can." Jesus replies that they will drink the cup, but not in the same way. They would drink the cup because they were Christians. They would suffer because they were followers of Christ. Christ's suffering is substitutionary and atoning, their suffering would be confessional. Jesus doesn't mean that they will be martyrs. James was killed by the sword for being a follower of Jesus ten years after Jesus' crucifixion, but John lived to an old age.

However, the point is that they didn't understand Jesus' Kingdom. It's not an earthly kingdom. The twelve apostles aren't going to be the twelve vice presidents someday. You're thinking about greatness in a worldly way. God's way is harder, more difficult, not glorious at all. It is a way of suffering, and of slavery and of servanthood.

The other ten disciples didn't fare any better than James and John. They were upset with the brothers, not because they sought greatness instead of humility, but because the other disciples didn't think to ask first. James and John beat them to the punch and so they became indignant with them.

This brings Jesus to his point. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.²⁶ Not so with you." Earthly rulers oppress their subjects and through this are able to maintain their rule. Earthly rulers exercise the authority that they have over them and this allows them to maintain their greatness. This is how the world operates and we understand that. But Jesus says, "Not so with you." "Not so with you." Aren't those powerful words? "Not so with you."

Jesus, tell us how it is to be with us. “Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” Greatness is found not in where you sit, but in servanthood. To be a servant is to be intent on serving another, not because you are forced, but because you want to serve. In other words you place the needs and wants of another above your own. Jesus, however takes it a step further. He goes from being great to being even greater than great, being first. Whoever wants to be first must be your slave. The slave serve another person expecting to receive no praise and honor for his service, but instead to be treated poorly.

Jesus turns the world’s thinking on greatness upside down and he turns our own thinking upside down. For the sinful nature in all of us seeks what is best for us, not what is best for others. To be the servant of another is one of the hardest things to do. If we do serve another we are hoping to get at least some praise or recognition for what we have done. To be first has been the sinful weakness of human beings since the fall. Adam and Eve sought to be first ahead of God. Joseph reveled in the thought of being greater than his brothers. Judas thought of his own well-being when he betrayed Jesus. Kids, don’t you agree that most fights you have at school or with your brothers or sister are because you want to be first? You want to be first in line, first for the candy, first for the toy or video game, or greater than someone else. Adults, we have the same problem. We want to be first and everyone else a distant second.

Fortunately for us all Jesus came to be a servant to all of us who have such sinful attitudes. He came and made himself our servant. He was way up here and put himself way down here to serve us. He died for our sins. He paid the penalty for me-first people like us. We owe him our very souls for his sacrifice.

What does Jesus ask us to do? Be a servant like me. Make yourself the servant of others. Be their slave even. Jesus says, then you will be great, but you won’t care because you are so busy serving others and feeling like you have won the prize. For greatness in the Kingdom is measured by the readiness and amount of blessed service rendered to Christ’s people. Whether they reward and exalt us for this service makes no difference.

We see examples of this kind of service all the time. A person makes a meal for someone who is sick. People work in the kitchen at a potluck, while the others get to socialize. Time is given to usher, sing, fix, clean, play piano or organ, and administer. The mother serving her children at home is great in the kingdom of God. God’s people serving others is greatness in the kingdom of God. I give thanks to God that I see greatness before me. Greatness because I see God’s people serving one another.

Life in service; that is what Jesus lived. Jesus empowers us to live that way too. Life in service, first of all to our Lord who has give us life. The disciples missed it. They didn’t catch it. Jesus said, “On the third day he will be raised to life.” Jesus lives again and he gave us life. A life to live in service to him by serving others, and a life lived in glory with him forever.